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RAND LETTER, BOLTE LETTER (start)

In mid-September I told Konrad Kellen that I was now ready to join with those at RAND who had been pressing over the last two years for a strategy of unilateral extrication from Vietnam. I suggested we have a meeting to discuss what we should do, and he brought five other people together in his office one afternoon: Mel Gurtov, Paul Langer, Arnold Horelick and Oleg Hoeffding. The first three were experts on China and Southeast Asia, Japan and Russia, respectively.

All of us had worked on Vietnam in one way or another, and the others had all contributed to the formulation of the Extrication Option the previous year (the option that Kissinger had dropped from presentation to the NSC). Except for Hoeffding who was in the Economics Department with me, the others were all in the Social Science Division of RAND which was headed by Fred Ikle. (It was Ikle, at Kissinger's request, who redrafted my second draft of the Options Paper to exclude the Extrication Option).

I told them what I had learned from Mort Halperin and Vann about Nixon's policy. He had tried the approach of proposing mutual withdrawal in negotiations, and that had failed. Nixon seemed to be hoping that it would take hold eventually if we stayed long enough, but I didn't expect that to happen and I didn't want to go on bombing and fighting while we waited for it. Unlike Nixon

and Kissinger, evidently, I saw the next-best alternative to mutual withdrawal as being unilateral withdrawal. I now accepted their argument that the only way for us to get out of Vietnam was to get out, unilaterally.

Because Nixon hadn't spoken at length on his policy since he had announced his hopes for mutual withdrawal in the spring, I thought there was still a brief chance to encourage him to take a different path before the passage of time, the piling up of more US casualties and his own public pronouncements made him feel so personally responsible for the outcome of the war that he couldn't accept less than success.

That was likely to happen, we all agreed, even with Clifford's proposal of July, to withdraw all US ground combat troops from Vietnam by the end of 1970, leaving the eventual withdrawal of logistics, air lift and air support units to be determined by later developments.

[This goes earlier:

In the July 1969 issue of Foreign Affairs, Clark Clifford, just six months out from his job as Secretary of Defense, took the almost unprecedented step of presuming to give his successor public advice on what policy to pursue in Vietnam. He prefaced this with a lengthy account of his own education on the subject, "a case

history of one man's attitude toward Viet Nam"(which was, in fact, seriously misleading).¹

He recommended that the new administration set a deadline of withdrawing all US ground combat troops by the end of 1970, while maintaining US logistics and intelligence support units and full US air support of ARVN indefinitely. It would lower US casualties, but it would probably mean at least four more years of US killing in Vietnam, and at some point there would be another North Vietnamese offensive aimed at taking US lives as well as well as those we supported.

Clifford may have intended and expected that his policy would end the war, even though it didn't on its face, by its psychological effect in Saigon. I suspected Clifford hoped that the shock of announcing our withdrawal from ground combat would send the Saigon regime into serious negotiations with the NLF and Hanoi, or cause it to be replaced by a broader coalition that would do that after its present members fled.

But I didn't believe either of those would happen. After this much war, Thieu and his cohorts weren't as skittish as Battista in Cuba. As Clifford himself noted in his article, so long as the war went on with American support, "vast amounts of wealth were being poured into the South Vietnamese economy," and that would continue, though at a reduced level, even without US ground combat

involvement.

As Clifford had concluded from his frustrating efforts to get Thieu to Paris in the fall of 1968, it would continue to be true that "Saigon was in no hurry for the fighting to end and that the Saigon regime did not want us to reach an early settlement of military issues with Hanoi" nor to reach such a settlement themselves.

They wouldn't give up their perquisites or their profit-taking so long as the flow of dollars and American close air support in South Vietnam persisted, in part because, ironically, that combination of support was likely to maintain a stalemate profitable to the regime and many city-dwellers longer and more reliably than Clifford may have supposed, even while troops and peasants kept on dying in the countryside.

So his proposal, though it was in the right direction and went further than any other public figure had so far proposed, wouldn't end the war, nor would it end direct US participation in it by any definite or foreseeable time.]

Where Clifford was right was in proposing that the US should now set a course, toward disengagement, that was independent of the wishes or the adaptations of either Saigon or Hanoi. But the others in the room had wanted for the last two years to go further

than he was yet proposing (they had so advised his assistant secretary Paul Warnke in 1968), and I now agreed with them.

Up till now the only public figures who had been willing to say to the government "Get out!", all the way out, had been counterculture activists like Abby Hoffman, radicals perceived as supporters of North Vietnam, and advocates of direct action/civil disobedience. What they called for was ignored or discounted, in fact their advocacy of it served to tar it.

The single closely-reasoned and eloquent expression of this approach had been a pamphlet by the historian and civil rights activist Howard Zinn: Vietnam: The Case for Withdrawal. But Zinn's powerful argument didn't recruit any better-known allies among academics and intellectuals.

Former LBJ advisors who had become public critics of his policy, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Richard Goodwin and Kenneth Galbraith, had called in his last year for reductions in involvement, an end to bombing and a turn to negotiations. They even chose to distance themselves from and denigrate more "extreme" proposals. The same was true for politicians like Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, Frank Church, and even Bobby Kennedy before his death. None of these had gone beyond such proposals in 1969, in fact not much had been heard from them at all.

In this climate, if the new president were to do what we thought he ought to do, he would have to get out publicly in front of those Establishment figures who had been most critical of the war, even taking the risk that they would attack him for taking too simplistic and extreme an approach. It would be the most risky kind of leadership, a sharp change in policy and a repudiation of near-sacred premises of the Cold War without any prior identification of allies with authoritative credentials. That seemed the last thing any president was likely to do.²

I suggested that the others in Konrad Kellen's office should now present quickly to the public outside RAND an updated version of their various internal memos analysing and recommending extrication as a policy.

Their argument was to the same effect and in some ways closely paralleled Howard Zinn's. But his exposition, despite his academic credentials, could be discounted in the same way as the views of the Yippies or members of the general public, as being uninformed by the secret information available to the president and his advisors. The same presentation by RAND "defense intellectuals" with clearances and government contracts as Vietnam researchers and consultants could not.

The beauty, the power and the purpose of our making a public statement along the same lines as Zinn and the antiwar activists

was to demonstrate that you didn't have to be a radical or a hippie, you didn't have to be unpatriotic or a fan of Hanoi (neither of which was true of Zinn, either), above all you didn't have to be ignorant of classified information to be an advocate of total and prompt US disengagement from the Vietnam War.

That could encourage opinion leaders in the media and Congress, who intuitively agreed with this approach but who were not Vietnam specialists, to feel confident enough of its soundness to join in supporting it. In face of foreseeable charges by colleagues that it was simplistic and extreme and reflected innocence of the real considerations at high policy levels, they could point to us for protection.

Together with us, they would give the same kind of confidence to members of the general public, and to their representatives in Congress. At a minimum, we could aim to expand the range of respectable, responsible debate, to include total extrication as a legitimate option or position.

Even if Nixon didn't accept this approach in the next year, serious discussion and advocacy of it could help press him to a much faster drawdown of US forces in Vietnam than he was now secretly planning, maybe a schedule closer to what Clifford had proposed. That wouldn't get us out, it was very much worse in our eyes than what we were proposing, but it was a lot better than

Nixon's policy and more likely to be adopted.

I was happy to join publicly in any such effort, but I hadn't yet written anything along these lines or even thought it through extensively. The others had, not only in the Options exercise of the previous year but in memos one or more of them had written both before that and more recently.

Speed was important. We needed to get their views into public discussion within weeks, before Nixon had taken a public position. If the scheduled Moratorium pressures were powerful, he would be reacting to them in the fall, either positively or negatively. We should try to affect the positions expressed in the Moratorium, just weeks away.

Rather than rewriting their position papers from scratch with my participation, it seemed to me that the fastest thing to do was just to reissue, with minimal updating, their internal RAND memos or documents as an unclassified RAND Research Memorandum (RM) or a RAND Paper (P), the two main forms for public distribution of writings by RAND analysts.

An RM was supposed to reflect RAND research, which this did, and it had more authority as coming from RAND. A P (this was the way we referred to these), which was always unclassified, was more for publication of academic research or personal reflections. RAND

took no responsibility for its contents, it was printed, with a cover, just as a professional courtesy to a staffmember. Still, a P might be appropriate and easier to get out, I thought, since this was an expression of controversial personal views.

However, Horelick and Kellen quickly disabused me of the idea that either of these could meet our time requirements. They said that since they had all done classified work on this subject, either an RM or a P on a matter of current policy would have to be subjected to a clearance process. And a paper with this particular policy, at this time, wouldn't get cleared in weeks, or months. Probably never.

In theory a P, on our personal views, would be reviewed only for classification, not for policy. But in practice, they said, a paper like this would be held up forever or its publication formally blocked on what were really policy grounds, or bureaucratic concerns, without any admission of that. This would happen even within RAND, self-protectively, or at higher levels of the clearance process in the Air Force or Defense Department. They gave some recent concrete examples.

"We can only do it in a letter," someone in the group said. That was the only thing we could publish something outside RAND without going through a clearance process. Even comments we intended to read at an outside conference were supposed to be

cleared. Only spontaneous, unplanned remarks at such a conference, or a letter to a newspaper or journal, could bypass clearance.

I was dubious. It seemed to me what was needed was a study that would lay out the facts as we saw them and present our argument more exhaustively than a brief letter could do. A letter just wouldn't be convincing to anyone who didn't already agree with us.

"It's a letter or nothing," the others said. If we invited a process of security clearance, the argument would be made that we were indirectly revealing classified data we had seen or that we could be interpreted as doing so. To a certain extent this was true. We even wanted that to be understood. But ironically, the realities we were reacting to were known to most people in the world. They were secret only to those who believed the public lies of the US Government.

The secret we were exposing, that we wanted to expose, was that access to the data privately available to the government did not automatically immunize one to realistic knowledge and conclusions that most people outside our government already shared, about the folly of our hopelessly stalemated involvement.

What needed revealing was that it was possible to have pursued a career as a sophisticated, expert, informed, responsible

government researcher and consultant with access to the same estimates and plans and inside dope that high government officials relied on, and to have reached the same conclusion as Abby Hoffman and a growing number of observers in the world without special information: that the place for the US to be relative to Vietnam was Out.

A letter could do that. It didn't need a lot of argument, it didn't need to convince people who were resistant to the conclusion. It would serve an important function if it just gave some confidence to the many who already agreed with it and if it got the notion at last onto the public agenda of debate as a serious, "responsible" alternative. Gurtov and Kellen volunteered to work on a first draft, and we made a date to meet again and go over it.

Meanwhile, I started work on a letter of my own, not for publication but to Charles Bolte, the executive director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which had called together the Bermuda group of consultants and former officials to try to influence Johnson's policy two years before. I wanted the group, or one much like it, to meet again, to the same end of extrication as our letter from RAND (though not to be bound to our same proposal).

None of them had been Vietnam or Southeast Asian specialists

like the RAND policy analysts, but as former ambassadors and diplomats, retired generals, publishing bigwigs (like Hedley Donovan, publisher of Time/Life) their views carried even more weight. They hadn't been close to considering unilateral withdrawal in the earlier meeting, their strongest consensus message then was to "cool it," avoid further escalation and stop the bombing, but two years later they might be ready to go further. If they were this was the time for it, I thought. The RAND letter itself might be a useful input for them, when it was ready.

However, I wanted this letter to do some convincing. I wanted the immediate recipients at the Carnegie Endowment and the people I wanted them to call into conference, to do something, to stick their necks out in an uncharacteristic way. To get them to do that, my argument would have to be much more detailed and persuasive, the letter much longer than could ever get printed in the New York Times, like the one Konrad and Mel were drafting.

It was unlikely that many of these Establishment figures were ready to commit themselves to the proposal we were drafting at RAND, total unilateral withdrawal on a time-table. But I hoped that they could lend their authority to the goal of unconditional, definite and total US extrication from the conflict.

There were alternative ways of achieving that worthy of discussion, to the exclusion of policies that threatened escalation

or allowed indefinite involvement. Just by discussing unconditional withdrawal in the context of these alternatives, such a group could help make our own proposal respectable and get a better hearing for it, as well as changing the focus of public discussion toward disengagement as the overriding aim.

I knew it would take a good deal of persuading just to get the Carnegie Endowment and the people I wanted them to invite to include the idea of unilateral withdrawal in their discussion. (Recall that Kissinger had been unwilling to do this at the beginning of the year in his secret presentation to the NSC of what was supposedly an "A to Z" range of options in Vietnam). To clarify my own argument on this, I wrote out a paper for discussion titled "Reflections on Vietnam Policy." Only the first couple of pages survive.

It starts by anticipating the kind of reaction our proposal could expect (and got) from current and former Insiders, corresponding to the criticisms that the Nixon White House had already raised to Clifford's more moderate program:

"Why should the President be advised to anything so simple, so simple-minded, so inflexible, as to determine a definite deadline and timetable for total withdrawal, announce it, and act on it?"

I answered: "Because our principal aim should be--in the

interests both of ourselves and the Vietnamese people--that American soldiers should no longer be involved in the war in Vietnam, that American arms and money no longer serve to enlarge or prolong that war. And alternative strategies to this one--less simple, less rigid, more flexible, allowing the President more scope to adapt to contingencies and to pursue other interests as well--are just too likely to fail to achieve this principal aim.

"Just as a plan to achieve victory can fail, a plan to extricate the United States from this conflict can fail: where that means failure to extricate, means that we stay, fighting, means that Americans are doing in Vietnam--and what this is doing to America--goes on much as before.

"A country so understanding of the merits of a sledgehammer approach in war should not find it so hard to comprehend the possible need for a sledgehammer approach toward peace.

"'Why should the President tie his hands?' Indeed, there are all sorts of reasons a President may want to tie his hands, something nearly everyone understands when it would suit his own aims. [This was the basic point that Tom Schelling had conceptualized in his writings, the incentives for self-commitment as a move in a bargaining process.] It is not, indeed, something the President does lightly. He does it (frequently) to have an effect--on the minds or behavior of allies, opponents, the public

or his own bureaucracy--it would be difficult or impossible to achieve any other way. (If he were to do it in this case--as I think he should--all four of these audiences would be targets).

The effects would not be as simple as the plan itself and they well might well serve a variety of US interests; yet the priority would for once be clear. It would be understood that these other aims would be sacrificed, if necessary--and not because they were unimportant--to assure the principal one of being out.

"In short, the answer to the opening question is that getting out of quicksand requires great concentration, single-mindedness, focus on the one main goal. It is difficult and chancy, not easy, and it is a mistake to distract too much attention in the process to secondary values, like "freedom of action" (to stay in, or to sink deeper), or one's grace and dignity in extrication, or ambitions for the long term.

"To propose a Presidential commitment to total withdrawal from Vietnam is to evoke the questions: 'But what is your answer to...' a variety of plagues following our departure: American humiliation, communist domination of South Vietnam, massacres. In truth, there is no assured, permanent, American 'answer' to these concerns: other than not to depart, ever.

"The test of an appropriate strategy now cannot be whether it

provides a 'solution' for every problem, guaranteed protection against all possible unhappy consequences at acceptable cost or at any cost. Nor, unhappily, that it will serve to 'justify' our 40,000 dead, or the deaths we have inflicted, or leave us glad that we went into Vietnam. [No possible strategy, I had concluded, really offered any of these desirable characteristics; at most it could only pretend, falsely, to do so.]

"If a commitment to total withdrawal is the right strategy now, it is not because it is either easy or simple, and certainly not because it precludes bad outcomes, even some extremely bad ones. It is because the alternatives look even worse: not necessarily over the next year, but over the next three to five years. And that is in part because they are all addicting.

"All have the properties that have betrayed us in the past, into ignoring recent disasters or trusting recent comforts, into testing one more method, trying one more time to realize past hopes, into fearing above all the pains of withdrawal, the anguish of kicking the Vietnam habit. The alternatives do not extricate; and the costs and the horrors, no matter at what reduced rate, mount up."

[TO BE CONTINUED]

END NOTES

1. I didn't know it at the time but in one respect he was very disingenuous in this account of his own involvement, in a way that perpetuated for a number of years a serious misunderstanding of the context in which LBJ had made his fatal choice of open-ended escalation in July, 1965.

He presents himself as having been a consistent hawk almost until he took office in March, 1968, having never questioned in his own mind or in government counsels the correctness of the policy pursued or of the premises on which it was based. This simply confirms the (false) understanding of his views that was prevalent when he took office and lasted until Larry Berman's book, Planning a Tragedy in the last '70's, and later his own memoir written with Dick Holbrooke.

Thus, as the arranger and the rapporteur of President Eisenhower's briefing of President-elect Kennedy on January 19, 1961, just before Kennedy's inauguration, he reports hearing Eisenhower say that we must not permit a Communist takeover in Laos, it was imperative that Laos be defended, and that if our allies could not be persuaded to join us in defending it we must intervene there unilaterally."

[In the next few months, Kennedy seriously considered and came close to doing that, at the recommendation of the JCS and many other advisors. After his disillusionment with such advice, particularly from the JCS, in the Bay of Pigs, he rejected (nominally, postponed) this course and instead pursued negotiations with the Soviets, among others, leading to a "neutralized" Laos, even though it seemed likely at the beginning and increasingly likely after the Accords were signed that the other side would not observe the agreements.

In effect he chose what seemed likely to prove a disguised and prolonged Communist takeover in Laos, over US military intervention to prevent it, under the cover of an internationally-negotiated agreement to neutralize the area. This was the "Laotian solution" which Bobby Kennedy told me in 1967 his brother would have chosen if and when the only alternative was to send US ground combat troops, which he was determined to avoid. Many have doubted that a Cold Warrior like Kennedy, in the context of persistent Cold War pressures in American domestic politics, could ever have carried out such an intention, even after his reelection in 1964.

But it is important to note that what Bobby was projecting was something that his brother had already actually done, in Laos in 1961-62. He had done this in the face of Eisenhower's own prediction only months earlier, reiterated emphatically by his own JCS, that "if we permitted Laos to fall, then we would have to

write off all the area" (Clifford's notes).

Those who dismiss the significance of RFK's comments to me or of JFK's comments to Mansfield, O'Donnell and Charles Bartlett in 1963 about his intention to get out of Vietnam in 1965 after his reelection are, in effect, supporting the view that there was no alternative for an American president to follow in the Sixties but an indefinitely-persistent, open-ended commitment to intervention and escalation in Vietnam, that the course pursued by LBJ and Nixon was inevitable.

Kennedy obviously thought otherwise, and he acted on that, in rejecting US intervention in Laos and pursuing negotiations instead, and in refusing to send US ground combat troops to Vietnam in late 1961 despite nearly unanimous civilian and military advice that failure to do that promptly would doom our efforts to prevent a communist takeover.

Almost certainly, either Nixon or LBJ, let alone Goldwater, would have acted differently from JFK in 1961-63 in the direction of earlier commitment and escalation, if they had held office in those years instead. There were real alternatives at each point, and it did make a difference who was president. The same was true with respect to Cuba, among other places.]

Clifford reports that Eisenhower's views on Laos in early 1961 and his sense of gravity about the issue had a substantial impact on him. "I had neither facts nor personal experience to challenge their assessment of the situation, even if I had had the inclination to do so. The thrust of the presentation was the great importance to the United States of taking a firm stand in Southeast Asia, and I accepted that judgment." (605)

He quotes JFK in 1962, while Clifford was on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, as saying of Viet Nam: "We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Viet Nam but Southeast Asia. So we are going to say there." Clifford says, "I had no occasion to question the collective opinion of our duly chosen officials."

"After President Johnson took office, our involvement became greater, but so did most public and private assessments of the correctness of our course." Far from suggesting that he personally ever dissented in this period from this consensus, after mentioning the 504-2 vote for the Tonkin Gulf resolution in Congress, Clifford then says:

"When decisions were made in 1965 to increase, in very substantial fashion, the American commitment in Viet Nam, I accepted the judgment that such actions were necessary." In context of his earlier and later statements, this is clearly meant

to convey that he shared this judgment in his own mind, or at least did not question it any more than he reports questioning privately the earlier judgments. Indeed, he states that implication explicitly two sentences later, when he says that "the optimism of our military and Vietnamese officials on the conduct of the war, together with the encouragement of our Asian allies, confirmed my belief in the correctness of our policy." (606, italics added).

That implication is false, and could hardly be more misleading. In May, June and July, 1965, both in meetings with the President and the JCS and with the President privately at Camp David, Clark Clifford had opposed all the various proposals for escalation by the JCS and McNamara, urging the President to withdraw totally from Vietnam, along the lines that George Ball was proposing simultaneously. Clifford had expressed this in the strongest possible terms, saying, "I see nothing ahead but catastrophe for my country" on the path that the President actually adopted. There is no comparably forceful language in the entire 7000 pages of the Pentagon Papers, which did not have access to Clifford's 1965 opinions.

Clifford treasured his role as confidential advisor to several presidents, and evidently hoped that it would continue. So as late as 1969 and beyond, far from taking credit for his earlier prescience and candor, he was still concealing and dissimulating the position he had expressly taken in 1965, rather than embarrass the still-living LBJ by revealing that Johnson had ignored such good advice to such fateful effect. He gives the false impression that doubts about LBJ's policy did not arise in his own mind till a trip he undertook for LBJ to talk with Pacific allies in the late summer of 1967, shortly before LBJ chose him to replace McNamara.

But the effect of this discretion is to falsify the range of authoritative advice which had been offered to LBJ at the time he made his choice and the kind of support he might have relied on if he had made a different choice. As Berman revealed in the same book, Clifford's view was shared by Senator Richard Russell, LBJ's mentor, by Senators Mansfield, Fulbright, Aiken and Chase, and by Hubert Humphrey, all, like Clifford, charter Cold Warriors and as sensitive and expert as LBJ himself on domestic political consequences, especially for Democrats, of appearing to show weakness on Communism or to lose an area to Communist control.

The prolonged, effective concealment and denial that such views had been forcefully and authoritatively presented to Johnson in the early summer of 1965 strengthens a sense of inevitability for his decisions then and for policymaking in general, a lack of alternatives perceived by trusted political operators as politically realistic. This false image protects a particular president from criticism or condemnation at the cost of encouraging future fatalism and quietism.

2. I had no awareness at this time if just how totally disinclined this particular president was to make this shift even with authoritative allies and encouragement. My informants like Mort Halperin from within the administration were themselves unaware of the strength of Nixon's commitment to a successful outcome in Vietnam, or what he was readying himself to do to achieve it at the very time I was meeting with my RAND colleagues. [See discussion of Nixon's "November ultimatum" and his Duck Hook plans.]

So my hopes in September and October 1969 were entirely misplaced. What I was proposing had no chance of changing Nixon's mind or his policies, by offering him support for and companions in shifting his aims. The Moratorium demonstrations, on the other hand, to which I did mean to contribute, did have a direct, immediate and very powerful impact, forcing him to postpone the escalations he secretly planned for November.

Even my later publication of the Pentagon Papers, toward which I began moving in these very weeks while drafting other letters, didn't induce him to change his aims or strategy. Instead, giving rise to fears of still further revelations, it scared him into criminal measures to silence or neutralize me to protect his secret policy. And these, eventually exposed, led to his own downfall and that of his policy.